



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# THE ENGLISH JOURNAL

---

VOLUME VI

APRIL 1917

---

NUMBER 4

## THE LITERARY STUDY OF THE BIBLE IN MICHIGAN HIGH SCHOOLS

---

W. R. HUMPHREYS  
University of Michigan

---

There are a few matters more or less closely related to my topic, which I might talk about, but which I want as far as possible to avoid talking about. For one thing, I have no definite counsel to give concerning the use of the Bible in the grades. That the Bible should be used there I am certain; but how much and by what methods—these questions may well furnish the subject of another paper by another person. Again, I do not wish to be considered as dealing with the question of so-called devotional exercises. What I hope to interest you in is something more, and, as it may appear, something less than that. For, thirdly, I shall not attempt to deal with the larger and more troublesome question of the place of religion in education. That question is so very troublesome that it will force itself upon us here too. But so far as we can we shall look at the Bible, not from the side of religion, but from the side of literature.

Concerning the literary study of the Bible in Michigan high schools I mean to ask, and to attempt to answer, four questions. First, What is being done? Secondly, What can be done? Thirdly, What ought to be done? Fourthly, How ought it to be done?

## I

To the first question—What is being done?—the answer is short. The answer is nothing.

It may be that this answer is too short to be true. If it is, some of you will know it, and I shall be glad to be put in the wrong. Possibly I should have addressed a questionnaire on the subject to every high-school principal in the state. But I didn't have stamps enough to go around, and the demands of a strictly scientific method of investigation would have been satisfied with nothing short of a complete report. I have preferred to take the testimony of a number of men who have visited most, if not all, of you, and who depose that if there is any literary study of the Bible in Michigan high schools they have found no sign either of its presence or of its effects.

## II

Assuming, then, that nothing, or practically nothing, is being done, what can be done? There are, it must be confessed, some lions in the way. The most venerable and ferocious of these is the Methodist who doesn't want his young ones taught Presbyterian doctrine, or the Presbyterian who doesn't want his taught Methodist doctrine, or the freethinker who doesn't want his taught any doctrine. Now I am not sure that it wouldn't be better for the Methodist's children to know more of Presbyterian doctrine, and for the Presbyterian's children to know more of Methodist doctrine, and for the freethinker's children to know more of both. I believe in exposing children to a reasonable variety of beliefs. Yet if the parent in each case does not agree with me, he is quite within his rights when he objects. It is even his duty to protest against sectarian teachings in the public schools; it is all the more his duty if the sect involved happens to be his own. If this is his attitude, he is a defender of religious freedom—freedom for others as well as for himself. He follows in spirit the men who wrote this law in the First Amendment to the Federal Constitution: "Congress shall make no provision regarding an establishment of religion." We owe, not only our religious liberty, but many other liberties, to the separation thus brought about between church and state. Let us keep them apart.

You may object that in this country there is no longer any danger that church and state will be reunited. I hope not. Yet they have a perverse affinity for each other; and eternal vigilance must be the price of this liberty too. Let me illustrate. The National Education Association recently published a valuable monograph on *The Essential Place of Religion in Education*. Most of the contributors to that monograph hold fast to our American doctrine of religious freedom, but some do not. A few put a dangerous weight of emphasis on the Supreme Court decision that this is a Christian nation. One goes so far as to offer the following argument: "The Indian Bureau, by an order of thirty years' standing, requires that any man or woman appointed to teach in an Indian school must be a member in good standing of some Christian church. If such a qualification is desirable in one class of schools, why not in all?" Poor Lo! Having lost his own liberties, is he to be made an excuse for the loss of ours?—I hasten to add that if this requirement were made, it would not affect my personal fortunes, unless favorably, by lessening the number of my competitors; my church dues are fully paid up, and I am on excellent terms with the preacher. But if the law made my position in school dependent upon my position in church, I should think myself a sorry spectacle in both.

Besides the general limitation which I have quoted from the First Amendment to the Federal Constitution, there are also state laws to be considered. On our special question of the use of the Bible in public schools, the states present a variety of laws wide enough to suit all possible tastes. Illinois, California, New York outside of New York City, and a few other states exclude the Bible entirely; Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and New York City require Bible readings in their schools. The Michigan law stands somewhat unsteadily between these two extremes. The Supreme Court has declared in one decision that "the reading of extracts from the Bible is not prohibited by law in Michigan, there being no attempt made by the teacher so reading to explain the meaning of the passages read, or to instruct the pupils in any manner relative thereto." You will observe that the law does not state, nor has the Supreme Court decided, how much comment or what sort

of comment a teacher might add to the reading without becoming a lawbreaker. We know what is clearly permitted by law; we do not know just what is prohibited. I have the attorney-general's department to thank for the following opinion: "The decision cannot be regarded as determining the right to use the Bible as a textbook, which must involve, of course, explanation and discussion thereof. . . . Undoubtedly the question is an open one, and must remain so until the Supreme Court of this State has spoken definitely thereon." If I may add to this a layman's opinion, it is that in a genuinely literary study of the Bible there is nothing which violates the smallest letter of our state law. This is also the opinion of Secretary Springer of the National Education Association, and of Professor Whitney of your own legislative committee, men much better versed than I in legal intricacies. And to these opinions I will add two facts for the comforting of any who may be fearful: first, I have been giving such a course at the University for eight years; secondly, I am, as you see, still at large.

The gist of the whole matter seems to be this: Whether you can, within the law, add to your reading of the Bible instruction in the Bible depends upon the nature and purpose of your instruction. But to consider that point fairly, we must wait for the fourth question: How ought it to be done? Let us rather deal now with the third question: What ought to be done?

### III

Every proposed course of study must meet first of all the objection that the present program of courses is already crowded. It may be that in some departments of English represented here there is still open time. In such cases readings from the Bible might be added. But it may be that no such cases exist. Let us assume, then, that the problem is not one of addition, but of substitution. Let us assume that if you teach the Bible you must drop something else. In that case what shall you do? If you do well, you will not let the law of inertia decide; you will consider carefully the importance of the Bible, as compared with other subjects of literary study. For the whole question, I think you will agree with me, is one of relative importance.

I am now setting out to convince you—or better, to remind you, for you already know it—that the Bible is of transcendent importance. Please understand that I am neither a professional pietist nor a Bible specialist, coming to you from without and asking you to make room in your house for my wares. I am a teacher of English literature; my courses carry me every year over the whole field; less than one-fifth of my teaching hours are given to the Bible. From an experience, therefore, as general as any of yours, I have come to believe that of all the many masterpieces that enrich English literature the English Bible is the one we can least afford to neglect.

Before we leave the problem of the study program, however, it might be well to notice that the Bible is included among the books recommended by the Joint Conference on Uniform Entrance Requirements in English. For those students who expect to go on to college, this study may be made a part of their direct preparation. But it is rather of the needs of those who do not go on that I am thinking. A student may come to college without the Bible and find it there. But if he stops with high school and is still in ignorance of it, he is likely to continue in that evil state.

But I return to the question of the importance of the Bible to the literary student. Concerning the intrinsic excellence of the Bible as literature it would be an impertinence to say much. It is unnecessary, if not impossible, to argue a point which everybody concedes. Goethe, a poet and philosopher in whom there was a pronounced strain of paganism, said: "The Book of Ruth is the most beautiful epic and idyllic whole that has come down to us." The great French skeptic Renan said: "The Book of Luke is the most beautiful book in the world." Our own Dr. Angell, who was a devout Christian, but not a man given to extreme statements, said: "Familiarity with the Scriptures is the most valuable part of a liberal education." I could spend the rest of my time quoting similar tributes to different parts of the Bible or to the Bible as a whole. But I will not. If anybody needs conviction on this point, I can only repeat an ancient recommendation, and say to him, "Search the Scriptures."

A matter, not of greater importance, but of more direct concern to us, is that of the place which the Bible, written originally in

Hebrew and Greek, has gained in English literature. We may, to be sure, think of the Bible as containing a literature foreign and remote. It reflects, not our modern western world, but a world which, in laws, in manners, in dress, in all the externals of life, is very far from ours. How then can we hope to incorporate into our literature these records of a strange land, written in strange tongues? How indeed, if we had it to do? But, happily, what might seem an impossible task is already an accomplished fact. Ever since the appearance of the King James's Version, more than three hundred years ago, the Bible has stood, not only as the most sublime and inspiring book in the English language, but as the most English book in the English language.

And this statement is true, no matter how you take it. You can prove it literally and mechanically by counting words. Gibbon uses 70 per cent of native English words, Johnson 72 per cent, Macaulay 75, Pope 80, Spenser 86, Tennyson 88, Shakespeare 90, the King James Bible 94. Or, if you move up from words to phrases, where outside the Bible will you find an idiom so purely English, a style so little disfigured with ink-horn terms?

If now, before we go any farther along this line, we stop and ask why the English Bible is above all other books purely English in diction and in style, we may find in the answer evidence that it is English in other ways too.

One reason why the Bible is such good English is because it was not left for our age to translate. Since the time of King James the language has improved as a tool for science, but for the uses of literary art it has grown unwieldy. It has added to itself a vast equipment for the expression of abstract ideas: thousands upon thousands of long words borrowed from Latin and Greek, most of which are yet strangers in our speech. They have their uses, of course; otherwise they would not have been called into use. But even when we do not need them they stand in our way and make pure English hard for us to attain. To the writers of three hundred years ago pure English came naturally and easily. The old words which had always been used to denote concrete objects, to name things seen, felt, and done, these still made up the body of the language.

We are not surprised, then, to find in any book from the reign of King James or earlier a well of English undefiled. But we may still wonder that the Bible, a translation, is more consistently English in word and phrase than any originally English book of the period. There are at least two reasons for this. We must remember first that the translators were men of the Reformation, and that the great purpose of the Reformation was to bring the gospel back to the plain people. The words of the Bible, therefore, are mainly those native English words that are common to all of us.

But even more of the simplicity of the English Bible is due to the simplicity of the original. As long as the Hebrew language continued to be written, "its vocabulary had no words except for the concrete objects of the external world."<sup>1</sup> It knew no disembodied thoughts, no merely intellectual conceptions. The Hebrew writer may say, for instance, that God forgives sins. But he does not say it in those words. This is the way it appears to him: "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." Sin, you see, is red; literally, you see it. And sin forgiven turns white. That is, each is expressed in terms that appeal, not to the intellect, but to the senses.

It is largely this dependence upon the concrete realities of human experience that gives to the Bible its abiding mastery over men's hearts. Theories come and go, but experience is constant. Our opinions about the solar system are very different from those our forefathers held, but we see the same sun, moon, and stars as they, if we will only look. So the Bible, resting upon experience, is a book not only for the man who is trained in a certain system of belief; it is a book for every man who has lived. It restores to the scattered tribes of earth a sense of their common humanity. In that respect it is a primitive book, and among us it calls for expression in something like primitive English.

The Bible is important to us also on account of its influence. Its indirect influence upon English literature, through the life of the race, is immeasurably great. But I can speak only of its direct influence upon the thought and style of English writers. It has

<sup>1</sup> J. H. Gardiner, *The Bible as English Literature*.



been the strongest and most wholesome force in our literature. We have wandered away, it is true, into all manner of insincerities and affectations. But we have never wandered as far as we might have if the Bible had not been there; and in the end it always brings us back. Of this influence I must let one illustration stand for a host. John Ruskin, master of the most glorious prose style I know, said this: "My mother forced me, by steady daily toil, to learn long chapters of the Bible by heart; and to that discipline I owe the best part of my taste in literature."

If, in spite of these considerations, you insist that you will have your students read other things, but not the Bible, I must insist in turn that it can't be done. For our great English writers have assumed with one accord that whatever else their readers may not know they do know the Bible. As Washington Gladden expresses it in an essay in the *Atlantic Monthly*: "The one book with which a reader needs to have familiar acquaintance is the English Bible. All our best English literature is shot through and through with biblical quotations, maxims, characters, and allusions."

Nor does this statement apply only to the old standard authors. It is probably true that we nowadays read the Bible less than our forefathers did. But it is certainly true that our writers go on assuming that we know the Bible somehow, and expecting us to recognize allusions to it. Such variously popular writers as Kipling, Chesterton, and William Lyon Phelps will escape us at many points unless we are at least hearers of the Word.

Suppose even that your students are of the sort that will read no book willingly unless it is a recent popular novel. For their sakes please attend to the following list made up of the titles of recent popular novels. Some of these are very good books, and some are very bad. But they have one feature in common: in each case the title, which sums up the purpose and meaning of the story, is an allusion to the Bible, so that if the reader does not know his Bible he cannot read with understanding even the title of the book. This is the list: *The Inside of the Cup*, *A Far Country*, *The Seed of the Righteous*, *The Foolish Virgin*, *The Leopard's Spots*, *The Root of Evil*, *The Sins of the Father*, *As the Sparks Fly Upward*,

*A Clean Heart, The Land of Promise, The Just and the Unjust, Hagar, A Cry in the Wilderness, The Conquest of Canaan, The Destroying Angel, The Streets of Ascalon, The Kingdom of Earth, The Power and the Glory, The Prodigal Son, The Prodigal Judge, To Him That Hath, The Treasure of Heaven, Unto Caesar, The Way of a Man, The Way of an Eagle, The Woman Thou Gavest Me, Between Two Thieves, The Hollow of Her Hand, Vain Oblations, The Fruitful Vine, A Certain Rich Man, The Life Everlasting.* . . . . You don't read the Bible? Well, English writers still write for those who do.

It is now some time since we put the third question: What ought to be done? My answer, in which I hope some of you may concur, is that we ought to include readings from the English Bible in our high-school courses in English literature, and that we ought to do it for the following reasons: because the Bible is a masterpiece unsurpassed in world-literature; because, through the King James's Version, it has become above all other books a monument of pure and noble English; because it has had, and continues to have, a profound influence upon the thought and style of our English writers; and because, since it has entered so thoroughly into their works, it must be known by everyone who hopes to read understandingly any work of English literature.

#### IV

My answer to the fourth question—How ought it to be done?—will not be so long. Not, however, because the question is a small one. You can learn best how to teach the Bible by teaching it. And no matter how long you teach it, you will learn how to do it better every year. I will try to give only one or two suggestions.

You will remember that, in speaking of what could and could not be done with the Bible in public schools, I said that the law forbids any teaching that is sectarian. Upon us, as teachers of literature, this law can work no hardship. Instead, it will protect us against ourselves, if we need protection. For when we study the Bible as literature we are not concerned with the doctrines of any sect, whether they be true or false. Whatever system of theology we profess, that is the first thing we need to put out of our minds.

For the greatest obstacle to the literary study of the Bible is the modern habit of studying it as if it were a textbook of theology. Theology is not religion. It is the science of religion. It can never be an exact science, for it is impossible to separate religion from the rest of life, to suspend it in a vacuum. But theology is the attempt, at least, to formulate the data of religious experience into a logical system. The Hebrews made no such attempt. All their words, as I have said, were concrete; but to express scientific thought you must have abstract words—words which denote, not facts, but the relation of one fact to another. And the reason why the Hebrews had no apparatus for the expression of scientific thought is that they had none to express. They had not developed the scientific habit of mind; if they had, they would have developed also a vocabulary of abstract terms, or borrowed it as we have. They were not rationalists, but mystics. The truths they declared were not such as men reach by the indirect processes of reason; they were such truths as men see, and feel in their hearts to be true.

The New Testament, to be sure, was written in Greek, a language thoroughly equipped for the uses of science. And there are theological elements in parts of the New Testament, notably in the Epistles. But these are not the parts you would assign to high-school students in any case. You can range freely through the Old Testament and the first three Gospels and be sure that you will find in them no theology which you do not put there yourself.

What things, then, will the literary student expect to find in the Bible? It would be a true answer to say that he will seek the same things that he finds in any other literature. But the Bible has been read so much for other purposes that special helps may be needed here to establish a true literary method. So I am going to recommend to anyone who may consider teaching the Bible as literature that he read first one or more of the following books: J. H. Gardiner's *The Bible as English Literature*, Lyman Abbott's *The Life and Literature of the Ancient Hebrews*, Wood and Grant's *The Bible as Literature*. The first of these authors was, I believe, an Episcopalian; the second is a Congregationalist; the third book was issued by a Methodist publishing house. But none of the books is in any way sectarian. For each writer, though he may have

pronounced opinions on matters of theological doctrine, puts these matters aside for the time being. He does not discuss the varying theories that for many centuries have been growing up about the Bible; he discusses the Bible itself and tries to set it before us in the light in which it appeared to those who read it first.

I do not mean that you should use these volumes as textbooks, nor even that you should reproduce them in whole or in part for your classes. Though they are popular rather than technical works, yet they contain much that could not profitably be taught in an average high-school course. I suggest only that you read them, because I believe that they will help to produce in you that state of mind which will give to your teaching the right spirit and method. Your own judgment and your knowledge of your classes will tell you, of course, how modest or how ambitious your plans should be.

It is to these books (or to others like them) that I must refer you for most of the answer to our fourth question. But before I close I want to mention one misconception which a reading of these books may dispel.

I know a man who once told a class of young people that, though they might well make a literary study of the Bible, they must remember that the Bible is not primarily literature, but something else, presumably something better. He apparently held the too-common notion that the literary element in any writing is something which is added to it after the real work is done. But he was not a teacher of literature; and surely there is little need of telling you that genuine literary quality is never an afterthought, never a mere ornament stuck on the outside. The excellence of any worthy work of art is like the excellence of a flower. A flower does not put on color, or fragrance, or grace after it has attended to the practical business of growing. Whatever beauty it has is inherent in the seed, and is an essential part of its whole life. So a house is beautiful or ugly, not as it is painted, but as it is planned. So any creation, human or divine, if it is really beautiful, is inevitably so. And of no other literary creation is this so true as of the Bible. Even its literary graces, and they are many, are not consciously sought; they are the natural flowering of a grace that is within, the very grace of God.

It will not do, then, to think of the literary study of the Bible as nothing but an attempt to isolate its aesthetic qualities for separate inspection. We cannot leave out the substance. We cannot shut our eyes to that life of which the books of the Bible are after all only the expression. It is a wonderful life, the life of a race richly endowed with spiritual gifts, noble in deed, lofty in vision, sublime in utterance, made perfect through suffering. We may enter into the spirit of that life, too, if we are willing to stand out of the winds of modern doctrine and to breathe for awhile the healing air of the ancient East.